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ABSTRACT

Intended for administrators and policymakers as well as teachers, this digest explores the state of research into handwriting instruction and the printing versus cursive writing dilemma. After examining how handwriting is currently being taught, the digest discusses research supporting various kinds of printing instruction--block, italic, D'Nealian--prior to instruction in cursive. Research evidence indicates that printing styles do not make a difference but teaching printing should be retained in the lower grades because printing more closely resembles the letters found in typeset books. The digest then looks at the distinction between neatness and legibility in printing, making a case for moving all students, whatever the quality of their printing, into cursive instruction at the same time. Next, the digest explores the use of wide-lined paper and "fat" beginner's pencils, suggesting that the former is helpful while the latter is not. Finally, the digest looks at characteristics to remember when selecting a spelling program. (HTH)

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ERIC Digest

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Handwriting Instruction: What Do We Know?

There is increased emphasis on children's writing today, but the emphasis is on writing stories and essays that demonstrate that children are learning to think. However, before children can write anything, they must learn printing or cursive handwriting. Despite the influence of new technologies, the computer and the word processor have not replaced the need to learn how to print or write.

In the search for effective handwriting instructional practices, researchers have examined the following questions: How are printing and cursive handwriting usually taught? Should printing be taught first and then discontinued? What should be done with the children who are poor printers? Are special paper and pencils necessary? and Is there a single "best" method for teaching handwriting?

How Is Handwriting Taught Today?

Surveys indicate that it is generally in kindergarten or first grade where children are first taught to print. Cursive handwriting is usually introduced in late second or third grade. Instruction typically takes place as a group activity rather than as individualized, diagnostic-prescriptive instruction, even though some research supports the latter approach. Group lessons take place daily in grades one to four, but after that they are less frequent. The lessons—chiefly practice sessions—usually last from fifteen to twenty minutes each.

Materials and methods for teaching printing and cursive handwriting abound. The current volume of *El-Hi Textbooks and Serials in Print* contains sixty-three entries under the heading "Handwriting." In addition, handwriting and printing have been successfully taught through educational television, computers, and animated flip books. Other successful experimental methods have included eye-hand coordination training, perceptual and motor tasks, and verbalization of handwriting rules (Askov and Peck 1982).

Should Children Be Taught Printing First, Then Cursive Handwriting?

One primary justification for teaching children to print is that the printed letters look more like the typeset letters found in books. This rationale was taken on faith when the schools taught only traditional printing, called manuscript, which does not slant the letters as cursive handwriting does. Some schools now teach newer styles of printing, italic and D'Nealian for example, which slant the letters. Research evidence, however, indicates that printing styles do not make a difference—they are all equally allied to the typeset letters in books. Research also indicates that cursive handwriting is not as closely allied to typeset letters as are the various styles of printing (Duvall 1986).

In addition, some evidence supports the idea that the teaching of printing should be retained in the lower grades because it is more easily learned, is more legible, and is at least as fast to produce as cursive handwriting. Also, Askov and Peck (1982) cite studies which show that learning to print creates ease and allows the student to produce better writing.

Since printing can be produced as speedily as cursive handwriting while being as legible, and since it is obvious that the adult world generally accepts printing, it seems that tradition rather than research calls for the transition from some form of printing to cursive handwriting.

Should Poor Printers Be Taught Cursive Handwriting at the Same Time as Good Printers?

While quality of instruction is of greater importance than the time of transition from printing to cursive writing, some research supports the idea that second and third graders make a smoother transition than do older children. In addition, there is little evidence to support the thesis that poor printers will necessarily become poor writers. In fact, they probably will not.

The confounding problem is the tendency to confuse *neatness* of handwriting and printing with *legibility*. This is due in part to the fact that teachers do not commonly use handwriting evaluation scales because they are cumbersome. Teachers prefer, instead, to judge the quality of manuscript and handwriting subjectively. Legibility is marked by appropriate letter formation, size, slant, spacing, and staying on the line. A child's writing may be sloppy or messy, but still legible. Holding a child back because he or she writes messily but legibly may not be productive, since more practice with manuscript does not necessarily make a child's handwriting more legible. Possibly, teachers should move all the children to cursive handwriting at the same time, because the delayed children could lose self-esteem and motivation while not receiving adequate handwriting instruction (Armitage and Ratzlaff 1985).

Should Children Use Wide-Lined Paper and Beginner's Pencils?

It seems reasonable to use wide-lined paper when children are being introduced to both printing and cursive handwriting. Several studies have shown that children's beginning perform-

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ance improves when special paper is used. Second graders who are still printing do not need the wide-lined paper, but second and third graders who are being introduced to cursive handwriting perform better when they use special paper (Trap-Porter et al. 1983).

Special pencils, however, do not appear necessary. Research indicates not only that young children prefer adult pencils, but also that they do not write better when using a beginner's pencil. Furthermore, by the time children reach the third grade, they produce more letters when they are writing stories if they use ballpoint or felt-tip pens (Askov and Peck 1982).

What Should Be Remembered When Selecting a Handwriting Instruction Program?

Although there is a major concern about the difficulty children encounter when making the transition from printing to cursive writing, research has not shown one teaching method to be superior to another. For example, research does not show that D'Nealian, one of the newer methods, is better than Zaner-Bloser, a traditional method, for children during the transition. In one study, first graders trained to print in either D'Nealian or Zaner-Bloser produced initial cursive letters of similar quality. In another, children in the transition group produced more legible work if they had had Zaner-Bloser training. However, children in the D'Nealian group reversed fewer letters (Trap-Porter et al. 1984; Farris 1982).

Since there does not seem to be a "best" method, some guidelines are in order. Effective model handwriting programs have been found to have the following characteristics: they provide opportunities for students to verbalize the rules of letter formation and to evaluate their own success; they also combine verbal and visual feedback, i.e., teacher explanation and demonstration, with rewriting or reinforcement (Furner 1985).

Regardless of the program, copying leads to better results than just tracing or discrimination training (which helps one to read a letter more than to write it). However, children do not transfer knowledge of letters learned by copying to letters that they have not yet learned to copy, unless there is some demonstration by the teacher or discrimination training. When verbal instructions, such as rules for correct letter formation, are added to the demonstration, children do even better (Peck et al. 1980).

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